

Animal & Wildlife Damage Prevention

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The Utah Wildlife Services (WS) program is a cooperative effort between the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food and the US Department of Agriculture. Protecting Utah's agriculture includes protecting livestock. It follows then that the majority of the program efforts involve protecting adult sheep, lambs and calves from predation.

Funding for the program comes from a number of sources including Federal appropriations and State General fund. Livestock producers also contribute through a State tax nicknamed the "head tax" since it is assessed per head of livestock. Individual producers, livestock associations and counties also make voluntary contributions to the program to pay for contract helicopter flying.

Coyotes remain the largest single predator species in Utah, both in population size and in the amount of livestock they kill. Calves are vulnerable to coyote predation for a short period just after birth, and the majority of the calf protection is concentrated in the spring as cattle calve. In the absence of predator management, calf losses could approach 5% for the producers suffering losses. With predation management in place, losses are kept to less than 1%. Sheep and lambs remain vulnerable to predation year-long and the WS program works with sheep producers to provide protection on spring lambing range, summer range on the mountains and on winter range in the deserts. In the absence of protective efforts, losses of lambs would be 28% or higher, but the WS program in Utah keeps predation losses to less than 5% on a statewide basis.

Cougars and bears are also a significant predator of sheep, especially in the summer when sheep are grazed in the mountains. Fully 40% of the predation caused losses of lambs reported to the WS program are from these two predators. Predation management for cougar and bear is on a corrective basis and does not begin until kills are discovered and confirmed. In order to limit losses caused by cougars or bears, the WS program must be prepared to respond quickly when killing occurs.

A significant amount of predation management is necessary to improve wildlife populations and the WS program works with the Utah DWR to provide protection where wildlife populations are below objective. In 2005 the program worked in 16 deer units, 8 sage grouse areas, 4 bighorn sheep areas and 5 pronghorn areas specifically to protect wildlife resources. WS also provided protection for endangered black-footed ferrets and Utah prairie dogs in transplant areas. On one occasion, the WS program also assisted the DWR in the removal and testing of mule deer and an elk where disease transmission was a concern.

To assure that the WS program has no negative environmental consequences, Environmental Assessments (EA's) have been completed looking at the impacts of the program. While the program is very successful at protecting livestock and selected wildlife resources, there are no negative impacts to predator populations, wetlands and watersheds or other parts of the environment. Annual monitoring of our program impacts is conducted to assure that the analysis in the EA's is complete. During 2005, personnel from the WS program participated in wolf training as the State prepares for dispersing wolves from recovering populations in adjacent States. A significant amount of time and effort is necessary to assure that programs are in place to deal with wolves as they arrive. Per direction from the Utah Legislature a wolf management plan has been put in place by the DWR, and the WS program has a significant role in that plan. WS personnel will be primary responders when livestock are killed by wolves as well as assist in the capture, radio collaring and monitoring of non-depredating wolves. WS personnel are widely recognized as the experts in predators and our skills are needed to assure professional management of wolves as federally protected wildlife and through the transfer of authority to a State managed species.

The WS program also deals with other wildlife caused damage throughout the State. In Salt Lake County, WS operates an urban wildlife damage program which helps businesses, home owners and public institutions with wildlife problems. Raccoons and skunks cause significant problems and WS helps with technical assistance to prevent problems as well as assisting in the removal of damaging individual animals. Urban waterfowl, such as mallard ducks and Canada geese cause damage to landscaping and are a human health and safety concern. WS also conducts disease monitoring in the urban program and responds to human safety cases involving cougars or bears statewide.

WS assist farmers with damage caused by migratory birds including geese and sandhill cranes in alfalfa, corn and small grain fields and starlings and pigeons in feedlots and dairies. Occasionally, these same species create problems in public facilities. In 2005, WS assisted 2 municipal water treatment facilities which had starling concentrations. These birds were watering and roosting at the treatment facilities and their droppings created a significant health risk.

The public, including farmers and ranchers, values wildlife highly. In order to maintain healthy populations of wildlife and productive agriculture a professional program must be in place to mitigate the damage while protecting the wildlife. In Utah the cooperative Wildlife Services program fills that need.